



**Testimony Presented to the  
Senate Committee on Families, Seniors and Human Services  
HB 4041**

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Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 4041. I am Gilda Jacobs, president and CEO of the Michigan League for Public Policy, a nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to economic opportunity for all. While we agree that every child should be in school and learning, it is unclear how this legislation would help achieve this goal and, therefore, we oppose House Bill 4041.

The Family Independence Program is meant to provide temporary assistance for families experiencing financial hardship. These families are very low income and experience many barriers, including inconsistent work schedules; quality, affordable child care; and access to reliable transportation. House Bill 4041, which is based on current Department of Health and Human Services policy, is shortsighted, very broad and does not address the barriers to school attendance faced by families with incomes well below poverty. Furthermore, codifying this policy would tie the hands of the Department from having the flexibility to adapt and change its practices to better meet the needs of the families it serves.

The legislation fails to provide clear attendance requirements relying on the Compulsory Attendance section of the Revised School Code that a "child's attendance shall be continuous and consecutive for the school year." Truancy and attendance policies currently vary by school district as there is no state definition, which means that there may be inconsistencies in families losing their assistance.

House Bill 4041 would allow for the termination of benefits if a child in the family between the ages of 6 and 15 is noncompliant with the attendance requirements. It is very severe to punish an entire family for the actions of one child and will further limit the family's resources, thereby making it harder for all the children in the family to get to school and be prepared to learn. If the goal is to increase attendance rates, it would seem more logical for caseworkers to work with the family to identify and address the root of the problem. Such an approach would connect the family with the appropriate tools and resources to improve a child's school attendance. Should House Bill 4041 take effect, DHHS caseworkers could be limited in their intervention efforts in order to follow the letter of the law, more families will lose much needed assistance, and school attendance for other children in the family could be negatively affected.

Additionally, there may be an acceptable cause for having a high number of absences related to illness or disability. However, a family could become ineligible, lose benefits and not have the opportunity to explain the situation to their caseworker. House Bill 4041 lacks a clear process for appealing a decision by a caseworker to terminate benefits based on attendance requirements. Michigan's assistance caseworkers have caseloads of 600-800.

This policy punishes our most desperately poor families who face the most challenges in getting their children to school. One of every eight children in the state lives in a family with income low enough to qualify for the cash assistance program—with incomes under roughly half the poverty level—less than \$814 a month. This law would shut off the means to meet the family's basic needs such as shelter and work-related costs such as transportation. Over two-thirds of the caseload are meeting their work requirements. No other group suffers such consequences if their children do not attend school. You don't lose your job if your child has some arbitrary number of absences from school.

Furthermore, the cash assistance program is already not meeting the needs of families in Michigan during this protracted recovery period. Of the roughly 255,000 children in the state's families with incomes low enough to qualify for FIP assistance, only 68,000 were participating in 2013. Since fiscal year 2011, FIP caseloads have dropped by 55% and are projected to drop even further. Codifying this DHHS policy will make dire conditions for children even worse. The average age of children on cash assistance is seven.

DHHS policy should have the goal of helping families, not driving them into more economic crisis, which destabilizes the family and school attendance. House Bill 4041, codifying the DHHS FIP attendance requirement policy, could act as a hindrance to achieving this.

In summary, the League has the following concerns with the bill:

- Codifying current DHHS policy ties the hands of the department.
- Barriers to attending school are not addressed.
- Full family sanction for families with children between 6 and 15 years old is severe.
- Unclear definition of truancy or attendance policy—variance by district.
- Lack of due process to appeal a decision.
- Child poverty remains unacceptably high.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify today.